

VZCZCXR06038

OO RUEHB1 RUEHCI RUEHLH RUEHPW
DE RUEHNE #2631/01 2751314

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

O 011314Z OCT 08

FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

TO RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3649

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 002631

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/01/2018

TAGS: IN KDEM KWIR PGOV PHUM PINR PREL PTER SOCI

SUBJECT: THE POLITICS OF BANNING THE BAJRANG DAL

REF: A. A) NEW DELHI 2513

¶B. B) NEW DELHI 2498 C) NEW DELHI 2556

Classified By: POLCOUNS TED OSIUS FOR REASONS 1.4 (B AND D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Recent violence against Christians in Karnataka spurred on by members of the Hindu militant group Bajrang Dal has renewed calls to ban the group. This issue has become entwined with the UPA government's consideration of a variety of measures to strengthen the GOI's ability to combat terrorism, in the wake of the September 13 terrorist strikes in Delhi. While a ban on the Bajrang Dal would help consolidate support for the Congress Party among Muslims and Christians, it would potentially alienate sections of the Hindu community. Similarly, the BJP has a fine line to walk, having to distance itself from the Bajrang Dal so it can become more attractive to the mainstream polity but not disowning the Dal and losing its electoral base of Hindutva hardliners. The BJP relies on the Dal for help in campaigning, and BJP leader Advani, despite making the right noises, is unlikely to support a ban that would alienate a core constituency within the Sangh Parivar. Post sees an opportunity in the upcoming visit of the Secretary to emphasize USG concerns about the potential for religious violence during the run-up to national elections. END SUMMARY.

Congress: Considering the Politics of a Ban

¶12. (C) Longstanding but mostly perfunctory demands for a ban on the militant Hindu youth organization, Bajrang Dal, gathered renewed momentum in September after media reported that members were complicit in fueling attacks on churches in Karnataka (Ref B). The National Commission for Minorities supported a ban after its fact-finding team sent to investigate the Karnataka violence determined the Bajrang Dal's involvement. Stories also surfaced about the alleged role of Bajrang Dal followers in inciting attacks on Christian churches and homes in Orissa (Ref A), strengthening the arguments of those who favor such a ban. While the violence against Christians triggered the most recent calls for GOI action against the organization, the issue has assumed greater importance and attention due to identity and vote bank politics involving Muslim and Christian voters in the run-up to parliamentary elections next year and in the aftermath of a series of terrorist bomb blasts that have sharply intensified the Indian public's concerns about terrorism.

¶13. (C) Following the September 13 serial terrorist strikes in Delhi, the UPA came under fierce fire from the media and opposition parties over its handling of terrorism (Ref C). In response, sensing that terrorism as a political issue was gaining traction to its disadvantage, the UPA government publicly considered a variety of measures to strengthen the GOI's ability to combat terrorism. These proposals have caused some anxiety within the Muslim community, which often

sees itself as the unfair victim of the police's anti-terror campaigns. The discomfort in the community was further heightened by a police encounter with alleged terrorists in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood of Delhi on September 19. The shoot-out, which lasted several hours and was covered live on television, resulted in the deaths of two Muslim youth and one police officer. Although there is little evidence to support it, many in the Muslim community believe that the encounter was staged by the GOI to buttress its terror-fighting credentials, the two Muslim youth were innocent, and the police officer had been killed earlier by fellow officers over old internecine police quarrels.

¶4. (C) In this context, the issue of banning the Bajrang Dal is seen by many proponents as a signal of reassurance that tougher anti-terrorism proposals are not targeted against any single community. It also helps balance the GOI's existing ban on the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) for its alleged involvement in terrorist incidents. Supporters of the ban argue that the Dal's violent actions and extremist views fit the profile of other extremist groups such as SIMI.

Senior Congress leader Digvijay Singh said, "It is part of the same coin just like SIMI and it should be banned." The association of the Bajrang Dal with the Karnataka and Orissa anti-Christian violence makes it easier to justify such a ban in terms that go beyond merely addressing the Muslim minority's concerns. In pure political terms, a ban on the Bajrang Dal helps consolidate support for the Congress Party among its Muslim and Christian voting blocks. Outlawing the Bajrang Dal would be especially welcomed by some of the Congress Party's regional allies, particularly the Samajwadi Party which has a strong Muslim vote bank based in Uttar

NEW DELHI 00002631 002 OF 003

Pradesh.

BJP: Saying the Right Things

¶5. (C) Heading into an election, the BJP does not want to be tarred by the extremist activities of hardline members of the Bajrang Dal, which alienate moderate voters and undercut the modern mainstream image the party needs to project in order to return to power. On September 24, BJP Leader L.K. Advani made a strong pitch in favor of religious freedoms, firmly rejecting the idea of a ban on religious conversions.

Prohibiting "forced" conversions had been a popular move in many states because of its appeal to many voters concerned about India's Hindu identity. Instead, Advani called for a national debate on conversions. He further stated that, "In our country there can be no justification for violence or vandalism in the name of religion."

¶6. (C) Advani's remarks came as analysts began to notice and highlight the absence of any comment by the BJP leadership on the Orissa and Karnataka violence. Some analysts observed that his comments were fully consistent with the moderate and mainstream politician that Advani has become in the last decade. While Advani's remarks were welcomed by the liberal and secular slice of the Indian polity, no one took them to imply any endorsement of a ban on the Bajrang Dal. Indeed, most analysts believe the BJP will strongly oppose a ban on the Bajrang Dal because it is a part of the Sangh Parivar and many of its members are likely to be active supporters of the BJP during elections, sometimes providing security for certain BJP candidates. In the past, some Bajrang Dal leaders have also been accommodated within the BJP and have contested Lok Sabha and state assembly elections on the party ticket.

Comment: Both Parties Walking a Fine Line

¶7. (C) Both the Congress Party and the BJP are treading a

delicate line on dealing with the Bajrang Dal. For the Congress Party (and the UPA), a ban on the Dal would no doubt mobilize support within the Muslim and Christian communities.

Such a move, however, could cost the Congress with sections of the Hindu electorate who would see the ban as yet another example of "minority appeasement," a political whip the BJP would love to lash the Congress with in the elections. A ban could also re-energize other organizations in the Sangh Parivar to join the electoral fight against a party that is mounting an attack on one of their own. For the BJP, cutting the Bajrang Dal lose would hurt it dearly within its electoral base, the Hindutva hardliners. However, public defense of the Bajrang Dal and its tactics would undermine the efforts of the BJP to cast itself as a mainstream party with broad-based support. It would also scare away potential BJP allies and coalition partners. In the end, it may turn out that the Congress Party is only bluffing on the Bajrang Dal ban and believes that merely talk about it helps strengthen its appeal with the Muslim and Christian minorities. If the Congress does decide to outlaw the Bajrang Dal, it would be a clear signal that the party is not afraid of being painted as a purveyor of identity politics in the coming elections and is willing to confront the minority coddling issue head-on.

Recommendation

¶8. (C) Post sees an opportunity during the Secretary's visit to convey USG concerns about violence against religious minorities, especially in her meeting with L.K. Advani. President Bush touched on the issue of violence against religious minorities with Prime Minister Singh in Washington last week, and the European Union also raised similar concerns during the recent EU-India meeting in Marseilles. The Secretary's trip could further underscore how religious violence blemishes India's standing as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious democracy. Post believes it is important that India's political leaders hear this message, especially in what looks to be the run-up to a hotly contested parliamentary election next year.

Background on Bajrang Dal

¶9. (U) The Bajrang Dal is the youth wing of the Hindu organization, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Founded in

NEW DELHI 00002631 003 OF 003

1984, the Dal's slogan is "service, safety, and culture." One of its goals is to build several Hindu temples at religious sites whose ownership is currently disputed, including in Ayodhya where Hindu mobs--including Dal volunteers--destroyed a mosque in December 1992. Other goals include protection of India's Hindu identity from the perceived dangers of communism, Muslim demographic growth, and Christian conversion. Although the organization's website states the Bajrang Dal does not ascribe to violence or any unlawful activity, many observers see the Dal as the most militant among the Sangh Parivar family of Hindu organizations. Human Rights Watch has implicated Dal members in 2002's anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat.

White
WHITE